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Professor Brian Uzzi's award-winning research proves its lasting power

By Romi Herron

June 6, 2006 — An award-winning research paper once considered a “nightmare” by its author, Kellogg School Professor of Management and Organizations Brian Uzzi, has continuously garnered high praise from reviewers and is now on the brink of becoming a research “classic.”

“Social Structure and Competition in Interfirm Networks: The Paradox of Embeddedness,” which originally appeared in *American Science Quarterly* 1997 (Vol. 42, No. 1), was recently recognized in an *Academy of Management Journal* editors' forum as a particularly valuable and compelling example of empirical research. In the paper, Uzzi illustrates how social embeddedness affects organization networks through case studies of 23 entrepreneurial firms.

In the March *AMJ* article, 67 members of the journal's review board nominated 160 different papers. Of those, one paper was mentioned five times, another garnered four nods, and a handful of papers were noted three times: among that set was Uzzi's research, in which he examined degrees of trust in existing social structures of the New York City garment industry.

The same paper previously earned the Administrative Science Quarterly Distinguished Scholarly Contribution Award for 2003 and was translated into

Chinese and reprinted in Anne Tsui's (ed.) *ASQ Award Winning Papers On Organization Theory*, among other reprints. But Uzzi finds the success of "Social Structure and Competition" particularly satisfying because of early obstacles he faced with the paper.

"With the original version, I went through four rounds of extensive reviews with a changing panel of reviewers for two years, all before it was rejected," says Uzzi, a specialist in sociology and organizational psychology who has taught at Kellogg since 1993, receiving numerous teaching honors. "I remember I lambasted the editor for stringing me along as my tenure-track clock ticked away and they [persuaded] me to make edits that ultimately stripped away the paper's framework."

But two years later, unwilling to isolate the core of his research from the academic community where he believed it would make its mark, Uzzi revisited and revitalized his original draft. He incorporated his additional experience, along with useful feedback from initial reviewers, to address significant, but surmountable, challenges ahead.

For instance, Uzzi notes that most network research prior to the publication of this paper was "highly abstract," while he wanted to be "on the ground with people on the street" to prove his theory.

Despite the advantage of his fresh approach, journals do not always embrace casework, often preferring quantitative research, he said. And the publication in which he sought inclusion was not known for its favorable disposition to theoretical papers. To Uzzi's delight, though, the paper was published in 1997 after just one review round.

Further, with 804 citations, it has the potential to achieve "classic status" — garnering 1000 lifetime citations — in the coming year.

J. Keith Murnighan, the Harold H. Hines Jr. Distinguished Professor of Risk Management, and a colleague of Uzzi, shared his insights on the success of "Social Structure and Competition."

"Brian's research shows how people in a decidedly competitive context, the garment industry in New York, depend on and trust each other in ways that go far beyond the dictates of strict economic models," Murnighan said. "By showing that people revealed potentially damaging information to their close contacts, the research illustrates how unspoken bonds were particularly important in running their businesses effectively."

Beyond that, Uzzi's work proves that the most effective garment companies had sets of both strong and weak ties. The former allowed them to be particularly efficient; the latter protected them against unexpected changes in their industry.

"These double-barreled findings are particularly illuminating, and to top it all

off, the paper is beautifully written,” Murnighan noted. “It’s a classic in content and in style.”

The piece is also a testimonial to Uzzi's own networking abilities. His parents emigrated from Italy to New York City, where his mother made her living as a dressmaker and his grandfather also found work in the apparel business. As a child, Uzzi was accustomed to pincushions and design patterns scattered about the family's home, but he never imagined he would one day return to study the very fabric of the business networks in New York's garment districts.

It was those roots, he now realizes, that enabled him to analyze the interactions on the street to learn network patterns from those with whom his parents were connected. The contacts snowballed and his research base grew. Uzzi's investigations into actual cases with the leaders of the apparel organizations revealed the associates' trust levels were established in non-economic interactions, in activities including playing sports, screening a film, and many other social interactions.

Uzzi, whose continuing research focuses on the role of networks in creative enterprises in science, art and commerce, said “Social Structure and Competition” is appreciated for its accessibility.

“I think what readers loved about the paper is that they can really get into the material. Abstract thinking can be a barrier and this paper bridges the level between the real world and the abstract thinking.

He also attributes the paper's lasting power to its tighter focus. Though larger corporations like General Motors or Keiretsu were frequent choices of research in the mid 1990s, Uzzi deliberately narrowed his scope to arrive at the origins or networking.

He is optimistic its success will lead others to consider varying sizes of entities in research.

“The diversity that comes from looking at small, exotic corporations as well as large ones is valuable,” said Uzzi. “When you study smaller organizations you can concentrate on key dynamics that can sometimes be obscured in larger systems.”